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# The Impact of Ethical Leadership and Leadership Effectiveness on Employees' Turnover Intention: The Mediating Role of Work Related Stress

Meral Elçi<sup>a</sup>, İrge Şener<sup>b</sup>, Seval Aksoy<sup>c</sup>, Lütüfihak Alpkın<sup>d</sup>, a \*<sup>a,c,d</sup> *Gebze Institute of Technology, Kocaeli, 41400, Turkey*<sup>b</sup> *Çankaya University, Ankara, 06810, Turkey*

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**Abstract**

Having significant effects on organizational performance, the determinants of employee turnover has been studied extensively. One of the important antecedents of turnover intention of employees is leadership and work related stress. With this study it was intended to understand the effects of ethical leadership and leadership effectiveness on employees' turnover intentions. Work related stress is examined as a mediator of the relationship among ethical leadership, leader effectiveness and turnover intention. Using a sample of 1093 employees in 70 firms operating in nine different industries, it was found out that while ethical leadership and leadership effectiveness negatively affects turnover intention of employees, work related stress has a positive effect on employees' turnover intention. In addition, work related stress occur to be a mediator variable for the proposed relations.

*Keywords:* Ethical Leadership, Leader Effectiveness, Work-related Stress, Turnover Intention

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## 1. Introduction

Employee turnover is a major challenge for today's organizations. Hom and Griffeth (1995) indicates that since employees are recognized to be very important organizational assets; organizational costs incurred due to employees quitting their jobs and the subsequent hiring of replacement personnel, new-hire training, and general costs for administration can be tremendous in terms of personal, work unit and organizational re-adjustments. Therefore, turnover of employees is an important threat for organizations, which necessitates a thorough explanation of its effects. Voluntary turnover is defined as the process by which an employee willingly and voluntarily terminates membership of the organization (Bluedon, 1978).

Employees leave their jobs for a variety of reasons, there is consistent research evidence indicating that voluntary turnover can be explained by employees' intention to leave the organization. Turnover intention which is defined as a

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\* Corresponding author, Tel. + 90-262-605-1422, Fax. +90-262-654-3224

Email address: [emeral@gyte.edu.tr](mailto:emeral@gyte.edu.tr)

conscious and deliberate willingness to leave the organization (Tett and Meyer, 1993), is one of the significant predictors of actual turnover (Griffeth et al, 2000).

The prediction and understanding of employees' turnover intention had been studied from many different perspectives. Identification of antecedents of turnover behavior is important in order to understand and in accordance control turnover behavior (Vandenberg and Nelson, 1999). Many factors, such as organizational commitment, job stress, job satisfaction, self-esteem, supervisor support can have an effect on turnover intention (Siong et al, 2006). Firth et al (2004) demonstrated that turnover intention is mainly influenced by employees' commitment and their dissatisfaction from the job. According to the authors, leadership behaviors directly affect commitment and job satisfaction of employees, and this in turn affects the turnover behaviors. One of the important leadership behaviors is related with ethics. Trevino et al (2003) indicated that the ethical dimension of leadership is important due to the leader's influence on behaviors of employees. Ethical leaders act as role models in the organization; they promote ethical behavior among their subordinates (Brown et al, 2005). In addition, leadership effectiveness results in desired organizational outcomes. There exists a positive relation between leadership effectiveness and organizational performance (Smith et al, 1984). On the other hand, the experience and the range of factors that lead to job related stress cause employees to quit their organizations (Firth et al, 2004). Within this frame, this study focuses on the potential impact of ethical leadership, leader effectiveness and work related stress on employees' intentions to leave the organization.

## **2. Literature Review and Hypotheses**

### *2.1. Work related Stress*

According to Lazarus (1995) stress can be defined as the imbalance between people's perceived environmental demands and their perceived ability to cope with these demands. Blix (1994) stated that stress can lead to unwanted consequences of physical, behavioral and organizational aspects of the workers. Work-related stress is a major cause of occupational ill health, poor productivity and human error. It can result in sickness absence, high staff turnover and poor performance and a possible increase in accidents due to human error. Work-related stress components consisted of job demands, job control, managerial support, peer support, violence relationship, role clarity, and change.

The stress-turnover relationship has received considerable attention and has been empirically supported in different contexts, worker types, and cultures (Zhao, Liu and Zhang, 2003). Past studies suggest that one factor related to turnover is tension associated with the employees' present work. This conceptualization is in keeping with the prior established notion that increasing levels of tension in the current job may lead to a decision to quit the stressful work environment. Additionally, Cao Yu-Ping (2005) used causal modeling to find support for the notion that stress is a predictor of turnover. This has led to a general acceptance that the relationship exists and has likely led to a decrease in the number of studies on this topic (Zhang and Lee, 2010). Podsakoff et al. (2007) examined the 2-dimensional work stressor framework which is used to explain inconsistencies in past research with respect to stressor relationships with retention-related criteria. Results of meta-analyses of 183 independent samples indicated that whereas hindrance stressors had dysfunctional relationships with these criteria (negative relationships with job satisfaction and organizational commitment and positive relationships with turnover intentions, turnover, and withdrawal behavior), relationships with challenge stressors were generally the opposite (positive relationships with job satisfaction and organizational commitment and negative relationships with turnover intentions and turnover).

Dowden and Tellierb (2004) examined the predictors of job stress in correctional officers and marked the first meta-analysis for this topic. Overall, the findings revealed that work attitudes (i.e., participation in decision-making, job satisfaction, commitment, and turnover intention) and specific correctional officer problems (i.e., perceived dangerousness and role difficulties) generated the strongest predictive relationships with job stress. Furthermore, both favorable (i.e., human service/rehabilitation orientation and counseling) and unfavorable (i.e., punitiveness, custody orientation, social distance, and corruption) correctional officer attitudes yielded moderate relationships with job stress, with the country of study emerging as a critical moderating variable.

Houkesa et al.(2010), using two different samples tested a theoretically derived pattern of specific relationships between work stressors and outcome variables. The research model proposes four central domains of the work situation: work content, working conditions, social and labor relations, and conditions of employment. In addition, the research model proposes three important outcome variables: intrinsic work motivation, emotional exhaustion, and turnover intention. The results showed that the proposed pattern of relationships was largely supported by the data and that it was invariant across two samples. On the other hand, Nissly, Barak and Levin, (2008) investigated the

relationships among stress, social support, and intention to leave in a sample of 418 public child welfare workers. Workers with higher levels of stress were more likely to think about leaving, while those receiving greater social support were less likely. Social support did not buffer the effects of organizational stress, but had some effect in buffering the effects of work-family conflict.

Gaither (1999) examined the effects of job stress on job turnover intention mediated through career commitment, met expectations, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction. Career commitment positively affected met expectations ( $\beta = 0.35$ ), and met expectations positively affected organizational commitment ( $\beta = 0.66$ ) and job satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.78$ ). An increase in the mean level of job satisfaction and organizational commitment decreased the likelihood of job turnover intention. Mulki, Jaramillo and Locander (2007) investigated the effect of ethical climate on job outcomes. Responses from 208 service employees who work for a country health department were used to test a structural model that examines the process through which ethical climate (EC) affects turnover intention (TI). This study shows that the EC-TI relationship is fully mediated by role stress (RC), interpersonal conflict (IC), emotional exhaustion (EE), trust in supervisor (TS), and job satisfaction (JS). Results show that EC reduces (RS) and increases TS. Lower stress levels result in lower EE, higher JS, and lower TI.

Fang and Vishwanath (1993) developed a three-stage linear model of turnover with role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload as antecedents and stress as an intervening variable was constructed to guide this research. In addition, the moderator effects of external and internal opportunities, social support, and personal experience on the stress-turnover linkage were examined. Two samples of data were collected from nurses working in both general hospitals ( $N = 689$ ) and specialized hospitals ( $N = 441$ ). Structural modeling using the LISREL technique was employed to examine the fit between the proposed model and the data. In addition, data from American nurses collected by Bedeian and Armenakis were reanalyzed using the proposed model to test for generalizability of the findings across different national groups. All the hypothesized role stressors were significant predictors of stress. While the stressors failed to predict turnover intention consistently across samples, stress in all samples yielded significant predictions of turnover intention.

## 2.2. *Ethical Leadership and Leadership Effectiveness*

The last few years show a growing interest in the development and promotion of ethical leadership and leader effectiveness in organizations. Ethical leadership is thought to be uniquely important because of the impact leaders may have on the conduct of the organization and ultimately on organizational performance (Aronson, 2001; Kanungo, 2001; Trevino et al, 2003), on job performance (Khuntia and Suar, 2004). Besides, ethical leadership is believed to direct and guide organizational members towards goals and objectives, which benefit the organization, its members, other stakeholders, and society (Kanungo, 2001).

Brown, Trevino and Harrison (2005, p.120) have defined ethical leadership as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two way communication, reinforcement, and decision making”. The three elements of ethical leadership we distinguish are similar to the dimensions mentioned by Brown and colleagues. Drawing on their definition of ethical leadership and in line with previous research (Trevino et al., 2003), Brown et al. (2005) describe ethical leaders as honest, trustworthy, fair and caring. Such leaders make principled and fair choices and structure work environments justly. In line with Brown et al., we see leaders' fair and moral behavior as a core component of ethical leadership and we label this component of ethical leadership the concern for morality and fairness. In sum, we distinguish morality and fairness, ethical role clarification and power sharing as components of ethical leadership at work (De Hoogh and Den Hartog, 2008).

Brown et al. (2005) hold that ethical leaders are transparent and engage in open communication, promoting and rewarding ethical conduct among followers. Following Brown et al.'s perspective yet taking a slightly broader approach, we focus on leader's transparency, engagement in open communication with followers and clarification of expectations and responsibilities so that employees are clear on what is expected from them. We label this part of ethical leadership role clarification.

The bond between ethical leaders and employees is stronger which creates a pleasurable environment at work; this therefore causes a higher commitment and decreases turnover intention (Mulki et al, 2007).

## 3. Methodology

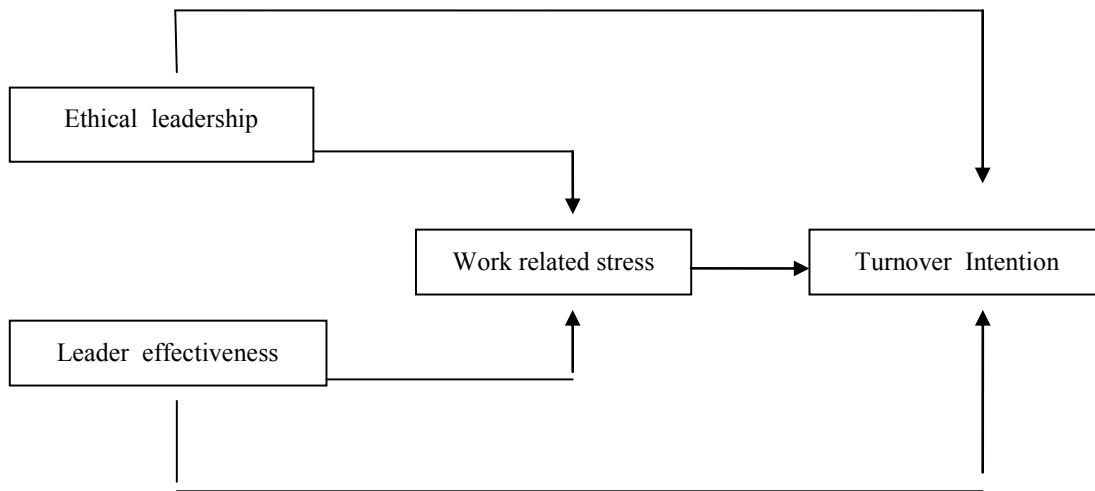
### 3.1. *Research Goal*

In this study, it was intended to investigate how ethical leadership and leader effectiveness influence work related stress and turnover intention of the employees. The following hypotheses are proposed for testing:

- H<sub>1</sub>: Ethical leadership negatively influences turnover intention.*  
*H<sub>2</sub>: Leader effectiveness negatively influences turnover intention.*  
*H<sub>3</sub>: Work related stress positively influences turnover intention.*  
*H<sub>4</sub>: Ethical leadership negatively influences work related stress.*  
*H<sub>5</sub>: Leader effectiveness negatively influences work related stress.*

Theoretical model of the research is demonstrated in Figure-1.

**Figure 1:** The Theoretical Model



### 3.2. Sample and Data Collection

The survey for this study is conducted in 70 companies located in İstanbul, Kocaeli and Bolu and operating in pharmaceutical, finance, manufacturing, services, health, food, transportation, information technology and construction industries. The sample size is 1.093. Most of the participants are working in pharmaceutical industry (Table-1).

**Table 1:** Industries in which participants are working

Industry	Frequency	Percent
Pharmaceuticals	309	28,27
Finance	231	21,13
Manufacturing	178	16,29
Services	120	10,98
Health	88	8,00
Food	74	6,77
Transportation	48	4,39
Information Technology	28	2,56
Construction	17	1,56
	<b>1093</b>	<b>100</b>

Employees' perception of the ethical leadership behavior of their superior/immediate authority figure was measured with the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS), adopted from Brown et al, (2005). In addition, Leader Effectiveness (Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire) Scale was used in order to measure the effectiveness of leaders. Work related stress was measured by the scale adopted from Keller (1984).

While turnover intention does not measure actual turnover, research suggests that an individual's intentions to quit or stay tends to be a good predictor of turnover behavior (Mobley et al., 1979). Therefore, in order to measure the turnover intention of the participants, turnover intention scale was utilized, as the final part of the questionnaire. The scale ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), indicating that a higher score implies a higher turnover intention.

Data obtained from the participants were analyzed by SPSS statistical package program.

### 3.3. Demographic Variables

The demographic profiles of the participants are presented in Table-2.

**Table 2:** Sample Profile of Participants

		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Gender</b>	Female	372	34,1
	Male	720	65,9
<b>Marital Status</b>	Married	640	58,6
	Single	453	41,4
<b>Number of Children</b>	None	628	57,5
	1	231	21,1
	2	188	17,2
	3 or more	45	4,1
<b>Education Level</b>	Primary	65	5,9
	High-School	180	16,5
	2-year Degree	185	16,9
	University	550	50,3
	Masters	113	10,3
<b>Position</b>	Personnel	753	68,9
	Mid-level Manager	222	20,3
	Top-level manager	63	5,8
	Partner	12	1,1
	Doctor	21	1,9
	Other	20	1,8
<b>Ownership</b>	Private	946	86,6
	Public	141	12,9

## 4. Data Analysis and Findings

The result of the factor analysis of research variables is provided in Table 3. A strong factor structure is supplied through the factor analyses performed upon variables concerned with ethical leadership, work related stress, turnover intention and leaders effectiveness. This indicates that the questionnaire statements used to measure these concepts were loaded to the variables. The total variance explained by this analysis is 67.019.

Table 4 shows means, standard deviations and correlations for all the variables used in this study. As it can be inferred from Table 4, the instruments used in this study were reliable, with coefficients ranging from 0,87 to 0,92,

that exceeded the minimum acceptance level of 0,70 (Nunnally, 1978). The mean score and standard deviations for each variable is listed in the same table. Correlation Analysis indicates a significant relationship between the variables. There is a high positive relation of turnover intention, respectively with, work related stress ( $r=,493^{**}$ ), ethical leadership ( $r=,367^{**}$ ) and leader effectiveness ( $r=,335^{**}$ ).

**Table 3:** Rotated Component Matrix(a)

Instrument Items	Ethical leadership	Work related stress	Turnover intention	Leader effectiveness
EL7 Discusses business ethics or values with employees	,752			
EL2 Defines success not just by results but also by the way that they are obtained	,749			
EL8 Sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics	,746			
EL3 Listens to what employees have to say	,732			
EL5 Makes fair and balanced decisions	,722			
EL9 Has the best interest of employees in mind	,719			
EL6 Can be trusted	,718			
EL1 Conducts his/her personal life in an ethical manner	,712			
EL4 Disciplines employees who violate ethical standards	,665			
EL10 When making decisions, asks “what is the right thing to do?”	,662			
WRS3 I feel used up after work		,803		
WRS 1 I worry about problems after work.		,800		
WRS 2 I find it difficult to unwind after work		,787		
WRS I frequently experience work-related stress and tensions.		,779		
WRS 2 I regard my job as very strenuous and demanding		,768		
WRS 4 I feel exhausted after work.		,763		
TI 3 I probably look for a new job in the next year.			,875	
TI 2 I often think about quitting			,866	
TI1 I will likely actively look for a new job in the next year			,833	
LE3 My manager is effective in meeting organizational requirements.				,756
LE2 My manager is effective in representing me to higher authority				,699
LE4 My manager leads a group that is effective				,697
LE1 My manager is effective in meeting my job-related needs.				,677
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. <b>Total Variance Explained:</b> 67.019				
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.				
a Rotation converged in 6 iterations.				

**Table 4:** Correlations, Alpha reliabilities and Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Alpha	1	2	3	4
Ethical Leadership	3,9353	,74151	$\alpha=,9179$	1			
Leader Effectiveness	3,8397	,86878	$\alpha=,8779$	,720(**)	1		
Work related Stress	2,8916	1,00130	$\alpha=,8929$	-,249(**)	-,241(**)	1	
Turnover Intention	2,1702	1,14981	$\alpha=,9251$	-,367(**)	-,335(**)	,493(**)	1

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Results of the regression analyses are presented in Table-5, Table-6 and Table-7. According to the results, both ethical leadership and leadership effectiveness affect work related stress and turnover intention negatively. The negative effect of ethical leadership on work related stress and turnover intention is slightly smaller than the effect of leadership effectiveness. It was also found out that work related stress has a significant positive effect on turnover intention. The effect of work related stress on turnover intention is highest when compared to other variables. In addition, the findings indicate that work related stress partially mediates both the relation between ethical leadership and turnover intention and the relation between leader effectiveness and turnover intention. Both of the effects of ethical leadership and leader effectiveness on the turnover intention decrease when work related stress is included in the model, which partially implies that ethical leadership and leader effectiveness reduce work stress which in turn reduces the turnover intention. In sum, all of the hypotheses are supported.

**Table 5:** Effects of Leadership factors on Work Stress

Model 1's Independent variables: Leadership Factors	Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	Beta		
(Constant)		14.986	.000
Ethical Leadership	-.147	-2.280	.023
Leader Effectiveness	-.164	-2.534	.012
R <sup>2</sup>		0,077	
F		18,645	.000

**Table 6:** Effects of Leadership factors on Turnover Intention

Model 2's Independent variables: Leadership factors	Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	Beta		
(Constant)		15.519	.000
Ethical Leadership	-.215	-3.476	.001
Leader Effectiveness	-.221	-3.585	.000
R <sup>2</sup>		0,157	
F		40,092	.000

**Table 7:** Effects of Leadership Factors and Work Stress on Turnover Intention

Model 3's Independent variables: Leadership Factors and Work Stress	Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	Beta		
(Constant)		8.084	.000
Ethical Leadership	-.154	-2.742	.006
Leader effectiveness	-.154	-2.737	.006
Work Stress	.413	9.788	.000
R <sup>2</sup>		0,312	
F		64,714	.000

## 5. Conclusion and Discussion

The main target of this study was to assess the effects of some employee work related perceptions and attitudes on their turnover intention which has mostly harmful consequences for organizations. Leadership is an important factor to decrease the turnover rate, and stress another factor that increases it. Specifically in this study we concentrated on the effects of ethical leadership and leader effectiveness perceptions of the employees on their level of stress and the turnover intention.

There are a number of different workplace stressors that ultimately produce stress for employees; since workplaces do and will continue to produce stress, it is necessary for organizations and their managers to find ways to reduce the negative consequences from this felt stress (Zhang and Lee, 2010). The leaders have an important role to diminish the



work related stress. Leader behavior has an important affect on employee behavior, such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Van Knippenberg et al, 2007). It is essential for leaders to earn the confidence and loyalty of their followers (Aronson, 2001). This can be realized thorough ethical leadership and leader effectiveness. Ethical leadership provides employee commitment and loyalty (Trevino et al, 2000). When employees are confident and loyal to their leaders, then the stress related to their work is decreased and they do not have a strong intention to leave their organizations.

Our findings confirm that ethical leadership and leader effectiveness negatively influences both work related stress and turnover intention. This implies that a type of leadership which is both ethical and effective at the same time helps reduce both stress and turnover. These findings and implications are mostly in line with the existing literature.

As far as to our knowledge, there exists no similar study in Turkey with a sample size of more than 1.000 including participants from nine industries. However, this study is also not without limitations. Depending on cross-sectional analysis is the main limitation of the study. Without the use of longitudinal studies, the relationships between stress and turnover intentions could not be understood properly. Future research on this topic should developed to be longitudinal. It is also possible to extend the theoretical model by including additional dependent variables such as organizational commitment, job performance, burnout, and absenteeism.

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